

A New Piece of Paradise

FWP's newest wildlife area and state park opens up more than 9,400 acres of hunting, hiking, and wildlife watching, as well as camping and Yellowstone River fishing. And it's only 30 miles from Billings. **BY TOM DICKSON**



PUBLIC LAND, IN PERPETUITY A grand view of lush river bottomlands and irrigated cropland opens up from a bluff overlooking the new Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area and Yellowstone River State Park.

TODD KAPLAN

As I'm walking along a bluff overlooking the Yellowstone River, all I can think about is what a perfect place this would be for someone to build a house—and how glad I am knowing no one ever will.

I'm visiting the new Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area (WMA) and Yellowstone River State Park, about 30 miles east of Billings. My colleagues at Fish, Wildlife & Parks, which acquired the property earlier this summer, have gushed about the site,

extolling its wildlife diversity, new hunting opportunities, miles of lush riverfront bottomlands, and potential for a new public campground just a stone's throw from Pompeys Pillar. The new acquisition was so important that Governor Brian Schweitzer attended the opening dedication ceremony in June. So I need to see what all the commotion is about.

My tour guides are Gary Hammond, FWP regional supervisor in Billings, and Bob

Gibson, coordinator of the region's FWP Communication and Education Program. As we drive toward what was known as the Circle R River Ranch, Hammond tells me the department purchased the property from a seller who had attracted the attention of developers hoping to create a private "hunting community," a type of development Hammond says "is happening more often around here." The property contains 3,976 deeded acres and includes 5 miles of wooded

Yellowstone River shoreline. The acquisition also secures for public use 5,450 acres of Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and state land that had been difficult to access. "It amounted to an incredible two-for-one deal for the public," Hammond says.

As we drive into the new WMA from the east entrance, dozens of mourning doves fly up from the gravel roadside where they had been feeding on sunflowers, and meadowlarks spill out from an old field of crested wheat-

grass. Looking out over the river from a bluff on this uncharacteristically cool late-summer morning, Hammond points to the back channel where last spring he flushed large flocks of mallards and Canada geese. He indicates another spot where wild turkeys regularly congregate. Wildlife biologists estimate the property also holds at least 100 mule deer, 200 whitetails, and roughly 50 pronghorn antelope, as well as pheasants, sage-grouse, sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge,

other waterfowl, and even an occasional elk.

Gibson drives us past expanses of native bluebunch wheatgrass, green needlegrass, and big sagebrush. The dirt road we're on will likely be developed enough to allow access into the center of the property close to the BLM holding. Like on other WMAs, off-road motorized use will not be permitted. "This is a place for walking, where people can get out and hike all day if they want to," Hammond says. We continue on through a vast black-tailed prairie dog colony, the peripatetic rodents whistling to announce our presence. With dozens of prairie dogs running around, we're not surprised to see a golden eagle gliding overhead. Two coyotes hunting the fringe of the colony sit down to watch us before racing off. In the distance, my binoculars reveal two tom turkeys feeding on grasshoppers, the insects still sluggish in the chilly morning air. Then a pronghorn buck stops to stare at the truck before bouncing over a ridge. All this wildlife, and we've only been here half an hour.

One mile farther in, we spook two big mule deer bucks that bound ahead before plunging down a steep bank to the river bottom. The area has received almost no hunting pressure in recent years, and Hammond says just four bucks were killed in the past two hunting seasons. That means deer have lived long enough to grow impressive antlers. We trot to the ridge for a closer look at the racks on the two bucks, but the deer have disappeared. Muleys will do that often at the Yellowstone WMA. Deep sandstone canyons and ponderosa pine-lined coulees provide abundant escape routes and hiding places. Finding whitetails won't be any easier. Beneath the cottonwood-canopied river bottoms are dense, shoulder-high stands of willow, buffaloberry, and other understory shrubs where bucks can disappear.

PACKED WITH WILDLIFE

Visitors won't need a gun to enjoy this vast landscape. It's also a great spot for bird watching, sightseeing, photography, and hiking. FWP's regional native species biologist, Allison Puchniak, says the new acquisition harbors a wide variety of bird species using the grassland, shrubland, riparian, and

ponderosa pine habitats. Though FWP has not conducted a biological survey to document all the wildlife here, Puchniak plans to begin one soon.

Ray Mulé, FWP regional wildlife manager, says it was the site's habitat diversity that first attracted his attention. The uplands consist mostly of ponderosa pine breaks and canyons interspersed with open sage benches and grasslands. Grassland plant communities alone generally harbor more than 300 wildlife species, he says. What's more, rocky bluff outcrops carved by the Yellowstone River provide habitat for Townsend's big-eared and northern myotis bats, milksnakes, and greater short-horned lizards. He notes that the prairie dog colony could support 30 other species for food and shelter, such as grasshopper sparrows, burrowing owls, and ferruginous hawks. And

Tom Dickson is editor of Montana Outdoors.

then there are those 5 contiguous miles of lush river bottom, sloughs, and oxbow lakes. "Riparian and wetland communities support the highest concentration of plants and animals in all of Montana," Mulé says. "They're like wildlife factories." Montana Audubon estimates that more than half of Montana's 245 bird species use riverside habitats, and FWP has identified 17 species most in need of conservation that rely on riparian areas or wetlands. Also in the river bottom are 90 acres of irrigated alfalfa, providing additional forage for deer, turkeys, and other wildlife.

As for the namesake river, the Yellowstone downstream of Billings is loaded with sauger, channel catfish, smallmouth bass, and burbot. Hammond says that FWP has no plans for a boat ramp—the Gritty Stone Fishing Access Site is 1 mile upstream across the river—but anglers will be able to fish from the WMA's river shoreline.

The proposed state park will be modest. Though no decisions will be made until an environmental assessment is completed, FWP has suggested establishing a campground along the river for campers, anglers, hunters, and visitors to Pompeys Pillar, a national historic landmark just 5 miles to the east. The agency may also add hiking trails and interpretive signs. Joe Maurier, chief of the FWP Parks Division, says he wants to station a park manager at the site. "What I like about Parks Division involvement on a large landscape like this is we would have a site presence. We could keep an eye out for fires, off-road driving, and other problems," he says. "At the same time, we'd have someone there to answer questions and provide interpretation of the area."

According to Gates Watson, director of The Conservation Fund's (TCF) Montana office, the owner of the Circle R River Ranch wanted to sell the property to a public agency but needed the sale completed faster than FWP could manage. To acquire the land, FWP worked with the nonprofit land conservation organization, which was able to quickly negotiate a purchase agreement with the owner. "For us, the fact that the acquisition opened access to more than 9,000 acres of public land was a big deal," Watson says. In April, the FWP Commission approved buying the property from TCF for \$5.3 million, a 5 percent discount from the appraised value and roughly \$1 million less than the original asking price. Most of the funding came from FWP's Habitat Montana Program, which purchases conservation easements, leases, and wildlife management areas using hunting license dollars. The remainder came from the Governor's Access Montana Initiative, which was approved by the 2007 legislature.

The acquisition proposal met with overwhelming public approval. Supporting it were the Billings Rod and Gun Club, Montana Wildlife Federation, Laurel Rod and Gun Club, Magic City Fly Fishers, and Public Lands/Water Access Association, Inc. "We're seeing an increasing demand by folks in the Billings area for public land," says Mike Whittington, a member of the Billings Rod and Gun Club who sits on the FWP regional Citizen Advisory Committee. "This



HABITAT DIVERSITY (clockwise from top) Mule deer hide amid the sandstone rimrocks and rough pine breaks that comprise much of the Yellowstone Wildlife Management Area. Crested wheatgrass fills the remnants of homestead-era farm fields, with the Bull Mountains rising to the north. The Yellowstone River bottoms are vital habitat for migrating songbirds, raptors, and waterfowl; part of the fertile lowlands eventually may be developed into a state park campground with interpretive signs and hiking trails. Several dozen wild turkeys roam the upland fields, pine hills, and river bottoms, feeding on a variety of foods ranging from grasshoppers to Russian olives.



site opens a whole lot of recreational opportunities to hunters and also hikers, birders, and photographers."

Not everyone supported the project, however. Several local landowners did not want hunters and other visitors driving past their property, raising dust and increasing threats of possible vandalism. Hammond says the county has applied dust-abatement compounds to the road, and FWP promises to increase the presence of game wardens, especially during hunting season. The county will continue receiving, in the form of annual "payments-in-lieu-of-taxes," the equivalent of property taxes that would be assessed on a private landowner.

CONSERVATION STRATEGY

Ken McDonald, FWP Wildlife Division chief, says FWP will consider acquiring land for a WMA only after proposals from area biologists undergo extensive internal and public review. A key consideration is that proposed properties contain plant communities and fish and wildlife species "most in need of conservation" (or "Tier 1" species) as identified by the 2005 Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy. "The riparian, sagebrush, grassland, and mixed-shrub grassland on the

property are all top-priority communities," McDonald says. "Then you have bald eagles along the river, sauger in the river, and also the likelihood of sage-grouse, milksnakes, and nearly a dozen other Tier 1 species. From a wildlife conservation standpoint, this was ideal."

FWP decided to purchase the riverside property not just for the wildlife but also its many other public recreation values, says Jeff Hagener, FWP director. Hagener explains that the WMA and state park represent a new approach by the department to derive broader public benefits from acquisitions. "Historically, we had a silo mentality, where the wildlife folks would focus on their particular silo—wildlife areas—and the parks people on their silo, and the fisheries folks on theirs. But with land values going up the way they are, we have to be more strategic and broaden our scope to work with many partners and get the most benefits to as many people as possible."

On the way back to the WMA entrance, Gibson slows the truck as seven wild turkeys cross the road. At the prairie dog colony, another golden eagle has joined the first, and the pair circles overhead. Then a mule deer doe and two fawns watch us with unblinking eyes before climbing a nearly



PHOTOS BY BOB GIBSON/MONTANA FWP

vertical sandstone bluff and disappearing behind a stand of juniper. We take one last look at the grand vista where the tour began, the dark green swath of river bottom below, the wide Yellowstone flowing past, and Billings in the distance. I think of a glossy color brochure I read the night before, produced by a property management company that had been promoting the ranch's abundant amenities. On one page was a photograph of the same scene we're now admiring. The caption: "A view from a possible home site overlooking the Yellowstone River." 🐾

For a map of the area or directions, call the FWP regional office at (406) 247-2940.

► **Biological Oasis**

FWP will consider acquiring property for a new WMA only if the land contains plant communities and wildlife species most in need of conservation (referred to as "Tier 1" species in the 2005 Montana Comprehensive Fish and Wildlife Conservation Strategy). And the more the better, which was the case with the Circle R River Ranch. Roughly 90 percent of the property contains riparian wetland, mixed-shrub grassland, and other Tier 1 vegetation community types. And though surveys have yet to be conducted, biologists expect that the property may hold a dozen or more different Tier 1 wildlife species, including sage-grouse and burrowing owls. "The Yellowstone WMA is a particularly biologically rich site for both habitat and wildlife," says Ken McDonald, FWP Wildlife Division chief.

Tier 1 Vegetation Community Types

Community type	% of area
Riparian wetland	1
Mixed broadleaf	1
Sagebrush and salt flats	15
Mixed-shrub grassland	30
Grassland	44
Non-Tier 1	9
TOTAL	100



Burrowing owls may live among the area's prairie dog colonies.

Tier 1 Wildlife Species Expected To Occur (based on existing habitat):

Bald eagle	Greater sage-grouse	Mountain plover
Long-billed curlew	Burrowing owl	Olive-sided flycatcher
Spotted bat	Townsend's big-eared bat	Pallid bat
Black-tailed prairie dog	Meadow jumping mouse	Snapping turtle
Spiny softshell turtle	Western hog-nosed snake	Milksnake